

# The Nazis and the Amazonians, but then again, Zeno

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*It's always night, or we wouldn't need light*

Thelonious Monk<sup>1</sup>

1. The deliberately paradoxical nature of the title of this symposium encapsulates a distinctive concern of some of today's most vitally important intellectual endeavours. There is only one of these that I can or should consider as my own untransferable matter of concern, that which seeks performatively to redefine anthropology as essentially consisting of a theory of people's ontological autodetermination, and of a practice of permanent decolonization of thought. I am aware that the very word "anthropology" may be jeopardized by this redefinition, given that it belongs firmly among the conditions of our current civilizational deadlock (or should I say, impending downfall) which bears a more than fortuitous relation to our unrelenting decision to ensure that the world continues to revolve around the Human in its various historico-conceptual guises. We could perhaps, in this case, rename the discipline as something like "field geophilosophy" or (in reference to our armchair moments) "speculative ontography". In any case, the relevant onomastics would continue to be Greek; there is little need to add that this also is not accidental nor is it inconsequential, from an anthropological point of view.

2. In view of the common horizon of the participants gathered here, the question for me becomes how to give the expression "comparative relativism" a meaning specific to social anthropology. Furthermore, I face the more difficult challenge of speaking about this theme without repeating myself, given that a great deal of my work — at least since I swapped field geophilosophy for ontographical speculation — has consisted in analyzing relativism not as an epistemological puzzle but as an anthropological subject, amenable to translative comparison<sup>2</sup> rather than to critical adjudication. The Amerindian-derived conceit of "perspectival multinaturalism" (Viveiros de Castro 1998) emerged precisely as a result of an

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<sup>1</sup> Epigraph to Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*.

<sup>2</sup> Or "controlled equivocation" (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

attempt to compare comparisons — that is, to contrast anthropological and indigenous modes of perceiving analogies between domains — and to trace a line of flight past the poles of the infernal dichotomies that form the bars of our metaphysical cage: unity and multiplicity, universalism and relativism, representation and reality, nature and culture, to name but a few.

3. Given these challenges, I resolved to turn to my favourite philosophical interlocutor, Gilles Deleuze, for inspiration. Re-reading his article entitled “On Four Poetic Formulas That Might Summarize the Kantian Philosophy” (Deleuze 1993 [1986]), the idea came to me to try to suggest four “formulas” — four quotations, and not all of them poetic — which in some way illustrate the idea of anthropology as comparative relativism. I kept to four for reasons of paraphrastic symmetry; the fact that anthropology is perhaps the most Kantian of all the Humanities is also mere coincidence. However, the decision to approach the theme by means of quotations is not contingent; recourse to examples as a definitional tactic makes evident the “whatever” (*qualunque, quodlibet*) nature of the passages chosen (Agamben 1993: 8-10) — neither individual nor generic, but precisely “exemplar” or “singular”.

4. Unlike the Deleuzian formulas, the ones I have chosen “exemplify” anthropology in terms that are restrictive (at least in part) — be it because they amount to extrinsic negations of anthropology which paralyse it, or because they suggest certain intrinsic negativities (virtual or actual) which propel it. Interestingly, all of the quotations more or less directly evoke the idea of *belief*, which as we know is profoundly implicated, in all possible senses (and especially the worse ones), in the majority of arguments that connect the themes of anthropology, comparison and relativism.

5. One more comment on the use of quotations. It does not merely reflect a penchant for the fragment, which I do admit to; like a post-modern intellectual or an Amazonian Indian, I also think that everything has already been spoken — which does not mean that everything has already been said. But this is not merely one more *collage*; it is rather a *bricolage* (no etymological connection, as you know), rearranging things which have been spoken so that they say something relatively, that is, comparatively new.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one of the most interesting questions posed, from the point of view of either field geophilosophy or speculative ontography, is that of connecting, disjunctively of course, the Lévi-Straussian contrast between the “*bricoleur*” and the “engineer” with the Deleuzo-Guattarian distinction between “figure” and “concept”. Does the concept of the figure exhaustively describe the practice of the *bricoleur*? Is it legitimate to talk of an anthropological concept of the concept? These are questions which we will not even begin to answer here. But it does not cost much to

## I

**“We Western liberal intellectuals should accept the fact that we have to start from where we are, and that this means that there are lots of visions which we simply cannot take seriously”**

6. This admonition of Richard Rorty's comes from *Solidarity or Objectivity* (1991a: 29). If at any point it was possible to feel a certain solidarity with the anti-foundationalist pragmatism of the author<sup>4</sup>, the sentence above seems to make perfectly clear that he and “we anthropologists” (to echo his singular use of the first person plural) are definitively not on the same side. We all know Geertz's (1985) arguments against what Rorty is proud to call his own “ethnocentrism”; there is no need to repeat them here. My intention in highlighting this passage is principally heuristic — can we learn something about anthropology from it?

7. I did not find anything obviously equivalent to this phrase in the anthropological literature with which I am more familiar; perhaps Gellner, or Kuper, have said similar things<sup>5</sup>. It did bring to mind, however, that marvellous observation which appears at the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*: “witches, as the Azande conceive them, cannot exist.” Evans-Pritchard's painstakingly detailed monograph was written exactly to resolve this problem: given that witches (as the Azande conceive them) “cannot” exist (as we conceive the notions of possibility and existence), how can the anthropologist take seriously the conceptions of the Azande concerning the existence of witches? How can the anthropologist *reconceive* — in other words, reconceptualize — witches so that they can assume a possible mode of existence — in other words, an *interest* — for us? (We will leave the question of who “we” are for the next paragraph.) If Evans-Pritchard's solution no longer satisfies us today, this does not take from him the merit of having at least tried to steer us away from “where we are” and towards the Azande. Rorty could be seen, in a certain manner, as confronting the same general type of

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ask them.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty's “solidarity” means “culture”, his “objectivity” means “nature”; and Rorty is all for solidarity, just as we anthropologists have been known to be very partial to culture.

<sup>5</sup> Geertz likens Rorty's ethnocentrism to certain positions assumed by Lévi-Strauss (1983 [1971]). It seems to me he misses a crucial difference. Rorty is extolling the virtues of ethnocentrism from the vantage point of a civilization that imagines itself as increasingly dominant: “...the gradual expansion of the imagination of those in power, and their gradual willingness to use the term 'we' to include more and more different sorts of people”(Rorty 1991b: 207). Lévi-Strauss, on the other hand, sees in a certain amount of ethnocentrism a society's protective reflex against its absorption by hegemonic projects like those for which Rorty elected himself spokesperson.

problem; only his reply is purely negative, also in the sense of being dismissive. As a matter of fact, each word in his admonition converges to a perfect anti-definition of anthropology.

8. It is not necessary for the anthropologist to imagine him or herself as a postcolonial cultural critic or something similar in order to feel very inappropriately identified by the definite description that specifies the initial “we”, which sounds more like an imposition than an acknowledgment. Geertz, it is true, would recognize himself willingly as a “Western liberal intellectual” (which is why his critical dialogues with Rorty always have a somewhat chummy tone), but I do not see any relation of consequence whatsoever between the anthropological point of view and such a self-description by a Western intellectual. The awkwardness does not, however, reside in the subject of the phrase but in its narcissistic metapragmatic structure: Rorty speaks for his internal public, his “tribespeople” — strictly speaking, there exist only liberal intellectuals in the United States — who already are where he is, and who are, by implication, very different to “them”, those others who do not think of themselves as liberals, perhaps not as “intellectuals” either, nor even, as Rorty is an author who is read far and wide, as “Western”. The problem here is that “we anthropologists” are in general known for our inability to say “we” with such smugness, be it because we speak principally *about* those who are more than ready to say “we are not you”, or be it because increasingly we speak *to* them, and in both cases our business is precisely to ask: “*who* are ‘we’?”; “*who* says ‘we’?”; and when? Or how? Our problem, in sum, is to determine the multiple conditions (not necessarily convergent) under which a “we” is possible. Rorty’s relativism of the rich and pragmatism of the powerful could not even begin to help us here, unless as a privative contrast: we are not *t*/his kind of “we”.

9. Now, what is the meaning of this idea we are enjoined to accept, namely, that “we have to start from where we are”? Without question this is where we have to *start* from, but it does not in any way inform us of where we could, should or want to *arrive*. In truth, neither does it tell us where *exactly* we are. Regarding this point, I see many more similarities between the “ethnographic effect” so beautifully described by Marilyn Strathern (1998) and the problem — as pragmatic as one could ask for — formulated by J.M. Coetzee just before he transforms himself into Elizabeth Costello:

There is first of all the problem of the opening, namely, how to get us from where we are, which is, as yet, nowhere, to the far bank. [...] People solve such problems every day. They solve them, and, having solved them push on. [...] Let us assume that, however it may have been done, it is done. [...] We have left behind the territory in which we were. We are in the far territory, where we want to be. (Coetzee 2004: 1)

10. This is the whole point: we have to start from where we are because here (the Western Bank, as it were) is *not* where we want to be. On the contrary, we want anthropology to reach and remain in the far territory, out in the open, away from the ironical recesses of the liberal intellect and thus faithful to the project of exteriorizing reason that, *nolens volens*, insistently hurls our discipline out of the suffocating boudoir of the Self. The viability of an authentic endo-anthropology, a desideratum that today finds itself at the top of the disciplinary agenda for multiple reasons — some of them even reasonable — seems to me, therefore, to depend crucially on the theoretical airing that exo-anthropology has always enabled, an outdoor or “field” science in the sense that really matters.

11. Let us continue fleshing out our anti-definition. Calling that which we cannot take seriously “lots of visions” is a far from subtle manner of begging the question. Something like “lots of visions” can only be a Pandora’s box full to the brim with fantasies, delusions and hallucinations — worlds worthy of “the Nazis or the Amazonians” (Rorty 1991a: 31). As we all know, lies are multiple (and the Devil is their Father), but the truth is One (as God). It is true that pragmatism does indeed uphold an intersubjective, consensual, and ethnocentric conception of truth; but this truth is still One. This leads us to conclude that what lies outside the “conversational” sphere of the pragmatic community of similars is the very essence of non-truth in all its proteic monstrosity. If there are lots of visions, it follows that we *simply* cannot take them seriously. There is nothing less simple or more arrogant than this adverb, which can (or must) be taken in its two main senses: that of facility (it’s easy not to take seriously this motley bunch of visions) and of peremptoriness (it is imperative not to take them seriously).

12. It is here that we arrive at the nucleus of our anti-definition: *that* which Rorty declares as being impossible to take seriously turns out to be exactly anthropology’s subject matter. Anthropology is “simply” that Western intellectual endeavour which is dedicated to taking seriously that which Western intellectuals cannot take seriously. Or, better still, anthropology is the endeavour which takes dead seriously the question of how to take seriously lots of “visions” — not in the sense of “beliefs”, that is consensual views, but in the sense of worlds seen objectively; not other world views, but other worlds of vision, other visible worlds – perceivable to the other senses just as well, besides being the object of extra-sensory conception. The quantifier (“lots of”) is more crucial than the referent (“visions”). In short, anthropology defines itself by exactly not accepting Rorty’s liberal prohibition. Its constitutive problem is how to acquire the tools which will allow it to take seriously what we are forbidden from taking as such. Anthropology therefore has facing it a double task. Firstly, it must construct a concept of seriousness (a way of taking things seriously) which cannot be reduced to the notion of belief and related “propositional

attitudes” which have representations as their object, neither to the hermeneutics of allegorical meanings, nor to the immediative illusion of discursive echolalia. Secondly, and reciprocally, anthropology must find some way *not* to take seriously a certain number of *other* “visions”, a way which does not in any way resort to the usual chest-pounding professions of unbelief, the widespread technique of irony, or the well-oiled critical machine. The reciprocity here is fundamental, for almost all the things that we must not take seriously are not far from or outside of us, but near to or inside of us. That which we *simply* cannot *not* take seriously – this is what we have to examine so as to ascertain whether it should be taken seriously at all. “Ethnocentrism...is essential to serious, non-fantastical thought” Rorty (op.cit: 30) declares; as can be seen, there is always a moment in which the ironist begins to talk of seriousness: the moment when he starts to refer to himself. The famous Deleuzian distinction between humour and irony, so important to Isabelle Stengers’s ecology of practices, is germane here. To take seriously that which we “cannot” take seriously demands as much sense of humour as its converse.

13. A final point on this citation. “The Nazis or the Amazonians” appear in Rorty’s text as twin *topoi* of alienness, as people who do not share any sort of relevant “premise” with us. The author gives the impression that he sees the Nazis and the Amazonians (also evoked as “primitive tribespeople”) as poles indifferently and therefore coincidentally antipodal to a pole of lucidity and civility represented by the liberal West consensus. Speaking as an Amazonianist, I beg to differ; from the point of view of an Amazonian, there are infinitely more things in common — pragmatically speaking — between the Nazis and Western liberal intellectuals than between the former and Amazonian peoples.

## II

**“One of the fundamental fantasies of anthropology is that somewhere there must be a life worth living”.**

14. This citation is taken from the David Schneider’s foreword to *The Curse of the Souw* (1967), Roy Wagner’s monograph on Daribi kinship. After the patrician contemptuousness of the previous formula, this one sounds almost hippy; a bit tacky, even. The flip-side of clear-headed American pragmatism, one is tempted to say: a quality of dreamy sentimentality, a simple-minded readiness to believe in impossible worlds, an adolescent mixture of optimism and bovarism: *somewhere*, as in “over the rainbow”? As we know,

however, *that* somewhere was, in the end, exactly where we started from — where we were. “There’s no place like home” — indeed. And what a dire conclusion that is.

15. However, I think that Schneider’s observation could be read very differently. It seems to me to contain a very serious, that is, utterly “non-fantastical” thought relative to the project of anthropology. His use of the idea of “fantasy” is the key to the seriousness of the matter, of course.

16. The respective formulas of Rorty and Schneider could be opposed point for point. Firstly, instead of a “fact” that we “should accept”, we have a “fundamental fantasy”. A fantasy is not something we are *forced* to accept or reject, but something that we *assess* from a pragmatic point of view, in terms of its greater or lesser power to make us think differently, to take us elsewhere so that we might have a more precise idea, by comparison, of our current location. Secondly, instead of the vacuous exhortation to “start from where we are”, Schneider’s formula points out where we are heading to. The unspecified character of his “somewhere” is necessary, not accidental, as far as anthropology is concerned — a determined indetermination, as it were. Thirdly, the object of the fundamental fantasy, its “aboutness”, is not “lots of visions” but “a life”; a vital difference, it seems to me. And the question raised is that of the real value of this life: instead of lots of visions we *simply* cannot take seriously, we have a life *really* worth living. Perhaps there are lives not really worth living; but how could one simply *not* take seriously a life, *any* life?

17. To get straight to the point: one of the things that could rightfully be called fundamental to the “fundamental fantasy” of anthropology is that it *must remain a fantasy*. Anthropology is over if the anthropologist starts to *believe* that the fantasy has been realized, and that he or she has “really” found a life worth living. Such a belief would paralyse all conceptual creation<sup>6</sup>. This does not mean to say that *nowhere* is there a life really worth living, which would, aside from being depressively nihilistic, be an unaccountably definitive (in both senses) thing to say, and therefore equally immobilizing. In other words, Schneider is describing a certain purely regulative use, in the classic Kantian sense, of a motive fundamental to anthropology. For the question as to the existence of a life really worth living is not something we can ever objectively or satisfactorily determine, whilst at the same time being something we cannot refrain from contemplating. Hence the construction

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<sup>6</sup> There is nothing more tedious and hollow-sounding than those ethnographic reconstructions that confront us with certain Western ethical ideals impersonated by non-Western actors. I am thinking, for example, of those descriptions of Amazonian sociality in terms of a sharing-and-caring convivial “community of similars”. These descriptions *entirely* miss the “boldness and invention”, the “continual adventure in ‘unpredicting’ the world” that Wagner (1981: 88-89) sees in places like Melanesia or Amazonia.

“there must exist” becomes the form of the epistemo-political imperative peculiar to anthropology.

18. In short, Schneider’s formula elucidates the extent to which anthropology is moved by a quest for *authenticity*, to evoke Rorty’s opposition between his own pragmatic quest for consensus and the “quest for authenticity” that he implies is always on the verge of veering off towards “fantasy” (as opposed to “conversation”)<sup>7</sup>. The notion of authenticity has full rights of citizenship within anthropology, and there is no reason to revoke them. Edward Sapir’s article “Culture, genuine and spurious” is one of the more profound reflections produced about the notion of culture, and it is perfectly clear on the subject of the difference between what the author calls “maxima” and “minima” of culture, authentic and inauthentic collective forms of life (Sapir 1985 [1924]). Such “maxima” and “minima” have nothing to do, as is well known, with levels of civilization; but they have *everything* to do with “life”, that is, with what Roy Wagner (1981: 89) called “a certain quality of brilliance” exhibited by those cultures he classifies as inventive or differentiating (“life as an inventive sequence”), and which exist everywhere — note the purposeful vagueness with which Wagner describes the bearers of these cultures: “tribal, religious, peasant peoples, lower classes...” Everywhere *except*, precisely, where we are, for methodological reasons, if for no other. “Somewhere” is the name of this methodological negativity.

19. Anthropology must therefore be able to find, or rather, construct conceptually, a life really worth living, which can only be done by deciding to take *theoretically* seriously the “lots of visions” provided by these other lives. But what does it mean to take seriously the lives of others? Would it mean “believing in” what Amazonian peoples, for example, think and say — taking what they think “literally”, as expressive of a truth about the world? I think not. The idea that to take something seriously is synonymous with “to take something literally”, and *further*, that “to take something literally” means “to believe in” strikes me as singularly naïve. Or perhaps the opposite, as a case of bad faith. Only by being too literal-minded could one fail to understand that to take anything literally is heavy work, requiring good provision of symbolic competence rather than infinite credulity. And in order to believe or disbelieve in a thought, it is first necessary to imagine it as part of a belief-system. But problems that are authentically anthropological are never posed in terms of psychological accounts of belief, nor in the logicistic language of truth-values. Alien thoughts cannot be taken as opinions (the only possible object of belief or disbelief), or as collections of propositions (the only possible object of truth judgements). Anthropology has already caused a great deal of damage (in the bad old days) by casting the relation between

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, it is in connection to this point that we find the only mention (critical) of Deleuze in Rorty’s book.



natives and their discourse in terms of belief — hence making culture look like a sort of dogmatic theology (Viveiros de Castro 1993) — or by treating this discourse as an opinion or a collection of propositions – hence making the study of culture into a kind of epistemic teratology: error, illusion, madness, ideology. As Latour (1996: 15) has observed, “belief is not a mental state, but an effect of the relation between peoples”. And in this case, if “to be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s belief and the others” (Rorty 1991a: 30), then to be an anthropologist is to divide the human race into the people whose beliefs one can legitimately challenge and the others. The problem, of course, is that each person is a people unto herself. (And, if we are to follow Amazonian “beliefs”, each race — each species — is human for itself.).

20. If it is not a matter of *describing* Amazonian (say) thought in terms of belief, neither is it a matter of *relating* to it in terms of belief — be that by suggesting its anagogical or allegorical truth (either a social truth, as for the Durkheimians, or a natural one, as for the cultural materialists), or by imagining that it will give access to the intimate and ultimate essence of things, a vessel of infused esoteric wisdom: “An anthropology...that reduces meaning to belief, dogma and certainty, is forced into the trap of having to believe either the native meanings or our own” (Wagner 1981: 30)

21. Refusing to pose the question in terms of belief seems to me to be a decision consubstantial with this concept of “seriousness” which we want to determine. There is a Deleuzian argument which may help us here, taken from his well known concept of “Autrui”, “Another” or “Other”. The Other is an expression of a possible world; but this world always has to be actualized by the Self, in the normal course of social interaction; the implication of the possible in the Other is explicated by me. This means that the possible undergoes a process of verification, which entropically dissipates its structure. When I develop the world expressed by the Other, it is either to validate it as real and enter into it, or to disavow it as unreal: explication in this way introduces the element of belief. Describing this process, Deleuze recalls the boundary conditions which allowed him to define the concept of the Other:

However, these relations of development, which form our commonalities as well as our disagreements with each other, also dissolve its structure and reduce it either to the status of an object or to the status of a subject. That is why, in order to grasp the other as such, we were right to insist upon special conditions of experience, however artificial — namely the moment at which the expressed has (for us) no existence apart from that which expresses it; the Other as *the expression of a possible world*. (1994 [1968]: 261)

Deleuze concludes by reiterating a maxim fundamental to his reflections:

The rule invoked earlier — not to be explicated too much — meant, above all, not to explicate oneself too much with the other, not to explicate the other too much, but to maintain one's implicit values and multiply one's own world by populating it with all those expresseds that do not exist apart from their expressions. (ibid.)

22. This is a lesson that may be taken to heart by anthropology. To maintain the values of the Other as implicit does not mean celebrating some numinous mystery that they enclose. It means refraining from actualizing the possible expressions of alien thought, and deciding to sustain them as possibilities — neither relinquishing them as the fantasies of others, nor fantasising about them as leading to the true reality. The anthropological experience depends on the formal interiorization of the “artificial and special conditions” to which Deleuze refers: the moment at which the world of the Other does not exist outside of its expression is transformed into an “eternal” condition, that is, a condition *internal* to the anthropological relation, which realizes this possible *as virtual*. If there is one thing that it falls to anthropology to accomplish, it certainly is not to *explicate* the worlds of Others, but to *multiply our* world, peopling it with “all those expresseds which do not exist apart from their expressions”.

### III

#### **“The arrow that some do not see leaving, others see arriving”**

23. “*La flèche que les uns ne voient pas partir, les autres la voient arriver.*” This is how Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, in *Outline of a Theory of Magic* (1893; in Mauss 1950: 88), summarize their reflections concerning the “grave question” of deception and simulation in magic. It is “impossible to imagine”, the authors insist in the section entitled “Belief”, that magicians or sorcerers believe that they do what they say they do: artfully remove the liver of their victims without killing them in the act (rather than killing them slowly); cause lancinating pain in someone's body by manipulating his or her effigy, and so on. But, if magicians cannot believe in their own magic, this does not stop them from believing in magic in general. “The minimum of sincerity that can be attributed to the magician is that he believes, at least, in the magic of others” (loc.cit.). When a sorcerer falls sick, and seeks the services of another “medicine-man”, he will see the arrows being drawn from his body which he cannot see when he pretends to draw them from the bodies of his patients. And it is thus that the arrow that some do not see leaving, others see arriving.

24. Mauss and Hubert's problem here is an enigmatic entanglement of credulity and scepticism, desire and perception, first-person and third-person perspectives which is characteristic of magic. The solution they alight upon makes reference to the definition of magical beliefs as being the original (social) form of the synthetic a priori judgement, where collective forces provide the pure and invariable form of truth before experience can stock it historically with empirical contents. In archaic worlds, which are under the complete jurisdiction of such collective forces, form predominates overwhelmingly over content.

25. But the Maussian formula seems to me to be strategic, in so far as — by tracing the outline of the “pure form” of anthropology, let us call it the magic of difference and vice-versa — it allows us to see that anthropology's method is a particular case of its object, or rather, that the object and method of anthropology are versions of each other. In this sense, the formula could be taken as a definition of anthropology, and further, could be defined as a “definition that defines itself”<sup>8</sup>. If for the French Sociological School magic is the epitome of *doxa* (common sense as belief), Mauss and Hubert's phrase confronts us with another object — *paradox*, with which anthropology (and magic) have a far more intimate relation.

26. As with the previous two formulas, our argument will continue to turn on the question of location. Where are we here, now? *Somewhere* along the trajectory of that mysterious arrow. Note that, in the context of Mauss' phrase, it is the same person who doubles up in the two positions of “some” (*les uns*) and “other” (*les autres*) — in his capacity as an agent, the sorcerer does not see the arrow leave; in his predicament as a patient, he sees it arrive. But the magical decoupling can affect different persons, of course, who usually express their (political) differences by way of this perspectival disjunction — as a rule, there are far more arrows seen in the moment of arrival than in the moment of departure. It is not necessary to see an arrow leave from somewhere to see it arrive where we are. This is how sorcery usually works.

27. This disjunction also mutually implies in a very special way the points of view of the anthropologist and of the native. The witches that Evans-Pritchard could not see causing, Azande saw effecting. Does this mean that the anthropologist's relation with the phenomena which he studies (native “beliefs”) is analogous to the sorcerer's relation with his sorcery? And if so, to *which side* of this double relation of magician and magic — the side of the agent, or of the patient? More than one anthropologist has gone the way of Quesalid (Lévi-Strauss 1958), to be sure; but this is not what I have in mind. The sorcerer and the anthropologist share (in different ways) the same necessity, to make belief depend

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<sup>8</sup> See Holbraad 2004, 2005 on “inventive definitions”.

on seriousness rather than the other way around. The “minimum of sincerity” is a maximum of seriousness — because magic is always somebody else’s.

28. Taken unprejudiciously (that is, slightly out of context), the Maussian formula does not allow one to say a priori who is right, not even if it has to be the case that someone is *not* right — either those who did not see the arrow leave, or those who saw it arrive. The only sure thing, however, is that the two sides cannot in principle be correct *at the same time*, which does not deny that each has good reason to see or not to see the magical arrow from where they are. Mauss’ problem is a problem of observation, or of measurement: who sees what, from where, and what happens when, being unable to see it, one does not know how to establish what exactly it is that one is or is not seeing. As Wagner memorably observes of his initial relations with the Daribi, “their misunderstanding of me was not the same as my misunderstanding of them” (1981: 20). It is as if we are dealing here with one more version of Niels Bohr’s principle of complementarity; that is, the existence of simultaneously necessary but mutually exclusive descriptions of the same phenomenon. The magic arrow could be seen as a quantum particle, for which only either position or momentum can be established. Analogously, the fact that “some” do not see the arrow leaving reciprocally presupposes the fact that “others” see it arrive. It seems that the arrow can only arrive for some if others do not see it leave, and vice-versa.<sup>9</sup>

29. It is here that object and method meet, as this is the anthropological situation *par excellence*: how to connect the two arrows, that of the anthropologist and that of the native, so that they become one? Just as it was the same individual who did not see the arrow leave and yet saw it arrive, so also is it *in principle* the same arrow that leaves and arrives. The arrow of the anthropologist must be the arrow of the native, and not any other (not a metaphorical arrow instead of a magical one, for example). Or, at the very least, it is necessary to make the two arrows coincide — to build a ladder of arrows starting with these two arrows, as exemplified by the heroes of Amerindian myths who, fastening a succession of arrows to each other, make a continuous stairway from the earth to the sky (starting at the end, in fact!), in so doing traversing the discrete interval — the abyss —

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<sup>9</sup> The mention of Niels Bohr and complementarity is not merely a homage to Copenhagen. Lévi-Strauss is fond of quoting a remark of Bohr’s in which he compares the differences between human cultures to the mutually exclusive ways in which a physical experiment can be described. I also remember that perspectival multinaturalism (the “spin” I was able to give to the theme of relativism with the help of Amazonians) presupposes the same relation of complementarity or duality. Non-humans see themselves as we see ourselves, as humans, but we cannot both see ourselves as humans at the same time: the apperception of one pole as human makes the other appear (be perceived) automatically as non-human. This is what occurs also, it seems to me, between the literal and figurative modes in the semiotics of Roy Wagner (1981), in the Saussurian theory of the sign and in the anthropology of Lévi-Strauss (Maniglier 2006).

which separates the two extremes of the cosmos. How to make ends meet? That is *a/ways* the question.

30. A conjecture follows. It is possible to speculate that the perplexing mixture of spontaneity and obligation, gratuity and interest, generosity and aggressivity which according to Mauss characterizes the “archaic” complex of the gift has a more than accidental relation with the ambiguity of magic with regards to scepticism and belief, charlatanism and sincerity, “voluntary illusion” and “perfect hallucination” which Mauss himself had observed in the *Outline*, some thirty years earlier in his career. I am not thinking of the notorious incapacity of primitives to distinguish between persons and things, which shapes the gift as well as magic in a causally negative manner<sup>10</sup>. Rather, I am referring to an epistemological effect on the observer, derived from a complex, overdetermined ontology common to the gift and to magic. This manifests itself as these two heterogeneous mixes of sentiments, both presenting an ambivalent dispositional nature (scepticism and belief, generosity and greediness) and also jointly involving a type of complex calculation which includes the other’s point of view in the definition of the meaning of one’s own actions for oneself: gift and magic are intentional multiplicities, disjunctive syntheses *in vivo* (Viveiros de Castro 2008). But this is worthy of a study in itself: the theory of value condensed in this magical arrow which links the gift to magic seems to me closer to the mark, I dare say, than the famous “false coin of our own dreams”.

31. It was only after a contemplating for some time the Maussian formula concerning the two faces of magical intentionality that I noticed the nature of the object in question: the *arrow*. The archetypal mediator of action at a distance and one of the most ubiquitous images of effective intentionality in folklore the world over, the arrow is the universal symbol of the *index* (look where the arrow is pointing and you will get somewhere), and the elemental *vector* of the “distributed person” (look to where the arrow came from and you will find someone).

32. Every arrow, by paradoxically transforming the far into the near and vice-versa – as scepticism transforms itself into belief, aggressivity into generosity, and reciprocally so on – every arrow is magical, for no arrow that we see arriving is actually exactly the one we saw leaving. But there is *one* magical arrow whose effect makes itself felt over very long distances. It was fired two and a half millenia ago; it hasn’t stopped flying to this day; and it crosses, in its trajectory, the Maussian arrow. I am speaking, of course, of the arrow in one of Zeno’s four paradoxes of movement, the arrow in flight that is always at rest, in eternal

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<sup>10</sup> With the gift, people are treated like things (Frazer’s barter of women); with magic, things are treated like people (Tylor’s animism).

freeze-frame, never reaching its target. At each instant (indivisible by definition), it occupies a certain portion of space equal to itself; if it were to move during the instant, it would have to occupy a space larger than itself, for otherwise it would have no room to move. As Bertrand Russell says, “it is never moving, but in some miraculous [magical!] way the change in position has to occur *between* the instants, that is to say, not at any time whatever”. And Russell concludes: “The more the difficulty is meditated, the more real it becomes” (Russell 1929 in Salmon 1970: 51). The scandal of the paradox is that the real difficulty is resolved in reality, and the arrow, against all odds as it were, rapidly arrives at its destination.

33. The Maussian arrow is just like Zeno's: it “never moves”, given that a straight line between its point of departure and its point of arrival cannot be traced, as if these two points belonged to heterogeneous dimensions or distinct series. Such an impossible quality assimilates both of these projectiles to another object of the same illustrious family, *mana*, Levi-Strauss' “floating signifier”: the concept of a perpetual disequilibrium between two series that make up the two unequal halves of the symbol — the series which contains an empty case (the arrow that some did not see leaving) and the series which contains the supranumerary element (the arrow that others see arrive). As this imbalance lies at the radical origin of semiosis, it is probable that here we have arrived at the proper place for anthropology to erect its watchtower: the crossroads of sense and nonsense. Perhaps it is unnecessary to recall here another celebrated phrase of Evans-Pritchard (as recalled by Needham)<sup>11</sup>: “There is only one method in social anthropology, the comparative method — and that is impossible.”

34. I cannot conclude my remarks on this formula without mentioning Gregory Schrempp's splendid work, *Magical Arrows: the Maori, the Greek and the folklore of the universe* (1992). The author explores the analogical (in the strong sense) relation between Maori mythology and the antinomies of the “Transcendental Dialectic” in the first *Critique*, as well as the Lévi-Straussian doctrine concerning the “passage” of the continuous to the discrete in the origin myths of clans or natural species, which Schrempp interprets quite correctly as a mythical version, in the Lévi-Straussian sense of the term, of the Eleatic paradoxes. Finally, Schrempp connects the most famous of these paradoxes, the “Achilles” one, with certain Amerindian narratives about the race between two animals characters, which to him suggests that the theme has an archaic, maybe even paleolithic, origin. As he comments at the beginning of the book, “such familiar little images”, like the race between ill-matched competitors that culminates in the victory of the weakest, “are, in philosophy and mythology, and within and without Western knowledge, precisely the stuff out of which

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<sup>11</sup> Apud Peacock 2007 : 44.

some of the most grand mental creations have been brought to life" (1992: 10). This we know (and know to be very true); and we do so, in large part, thanks to anthropology, and especially thanks to Lévi-Strauss. We know also that Zeno's paradoxes are an absolutely constitutive philosopheme of Western metaphysics; if there is one place, therefore, at which "we Western intellectuals" have to start, because in the end we never manage to leave it, it is precisely at this "vision" of Zeno's immobile arrow, floating in a kind of supranumerary dimension, exactly equidistant between the two poles of meaning and nonsense, subject and object, language and being, self and other, the near and the far side of experience. And we do get to the far side, with a little help from anthropology.

35. A quick aside, *in fine*. Schrempp calls our attention (1992:188-91) to the universality of the theme of the magic arrow; yet curiously, he does not mention the frequency and centrality of the motive in *Mythologiques*, despite his book taking *The Raw and the Cooked* as one of its principal axes of comparison between Zeno, Kant and Lévi-Strauss. We can do no more here than note in passing that Amerindian myths mobilize an astonishing diversity of quite unusual arrows, archers and firing techniques, bestowed with logically complex and evocative properties — like those arrows that only become deadly accurate after being broken into segments and reconstituted by a supernatural animal (or: hands-on workshop on integral and differential calculus); or those arrows that are so powerful that they need to be weakened with a magic ointment, lest they return to kill those who fired them (or: the dangers of hyper-reflexivity); or those that only reach their target if the archer looks in the other direction, that is, that only arrive where one desires if they are not seen leaving — just like the sorcery arrows in the Maussian formula (or: the art of indirection). The anthropologist, one could say, must have arrows possessing of all these qualities in her quiver; but most importantly, she must have those that connect disjunct worlds like the earth and the sky, or the two banks of a wide river of meaning. She must have arrows that serve to make ladders or bridges between where we are now and wherever we must be.

## IV

**"Même si c'est vrai, c'est faux."**

36. With this we reach the fourth, final formula; which is my favourite one, of course. *Even if it is true, it is false*. It can be found in *Face aux verrous*, a book written in 1954 by Henri Michaux, a Belgian-French poet, painter, thinker, traveller; ethnographer of the imagination,

mind-explorer. My commentary will be as short as Michaux's aphorism because it already says it all.

37. Science, as classically conceived, is based in the principle — to call it a “belief” would be a cheap shot — that it is possible and necessary to distinguish between true and false propositions, separating everything that is affirmed about Being into truths and falsities. Or rather, science can only exist where it is possible (*de jure*) to separate the true from the false, respecting the law of the excluded middle. “*If it is true, then it is not false*” and vice-versa. The maximum that one can admit — and which is a fundamental maxim of scientific good sense or “best practice” — is that *ceteris paribus* conditions always apply, and that a frame of reference should always be specified as well. Let us call this attitude “sensible relativism”. Anthropology's mission, as a social *science*, is to describe the forms by which, and the conditions under which, truth and falsity are articulated according to the different ontologies that are presupposed for each culture (a culture here being taken as analogous to a scientific theory, which requires its own ontology, that is, its own field of object processes required for the theory to generate relevant truths).

38. Religious belief, on the other hand — dogma as the propositional form of belief — is based in the principle that the distinction between truth and falsity is subordinated to what we could call “supra-sensible absolutism”. *Credo quia absurdum est* — I believe because it is absurd. In Michaux's terms, this is equivalent to affirming: “*Even if it is false, it is true*”. Tertullian's dictum, which, as is well-known, is a misquote, does not accurately reflect the historical or theological truth of Christian dogma; but it does express rather well the French sociological theory of truth, which was previously briefly evoked when commenting on Hubert and Mauss' phrase about magic. Magical and religious beliefs are a priori judgements (coming before individual experience), and this is the original form of all truth. It is society which separates the true from the false, in a way homologous to the self-separation of the social from the individual, the super-sensible from the sensual. Truth is social because society is the source and the reference of truth; what is false could only originate in the individual. Therefore, whatever it is that society *authorizes* is true, even if it be false from the subordinate, a posteriori point of view of the individual. As per Durkheim's notorious equation, God = Society, theological supra-sensible absolutism becomes the cultural relativism of sociology. Anthropology's mission, as a *social* science, is to determine which non-truths are taken as “God's truth” in any given society.

39. Between science and religion there is, naturally, opinion or *doxa* — that vast ocean of statements, which one cannot pronounce as true, false, or neither, or both. The caricatural, (auto-)deconstructive form of *doxa* is, precisely, paradox, which exposes the radical



impossibility of univocal meanings and the precariousness of every identification, a predicament (or a power) that is immanent to language. Epimenides' paradox — the liar's paradox — is a particularly apt example: "*if it is true, then it is false*" and vice-versa. Every assignment of truth implies a falsity, and reciprocally. We are here, in a certain sense, beyond cultural relativism, down amongst the paradoxical roots of human semiosis. Anthropology, conceived as a branch of semiology — the Lévi-Straussian, and indeed Wagnerian, project — shows in this case a predilection for studying the processes by which language and being, the signifier and the signified, the literal and the figurative, the sensible and the intelligible are reciprocally determined. The anagrammatic foundation of all signification, the arbitrary differentiation between a "nature" and a "culture" which, as it pre-dates them, does not belong to either of the two, becomes the prototypical anthropological object. *Doxa*, the "[culturally] different notions of common sense" that are "the object of study" of our discipline (Herzfeld 2003:2), in this case should be taken as the result of a decay (in the sense of radioactive decay) of paradox, the true genetic element of meaning.

40. There is, however, a fourth possibility, the most disturbing of all, summed up in Michaux's dictum, which introduces us directly into the world of simulacra and the powers of the false, a world which is not only beyond relativism, but even beyond paradox. Insofar as it is the inversion of Tertullian's pseudo-formula (just like the formula of the paradox would be the inverse of science's principle of the univocity of truth), Michaux's aphorism shows that the true opposite of "religious belief" is not "scientific truth", nor is it the indiscernibility of true and false as presupposed by formal anthropological semiotics. Michaux's formula is, literally, a *magical formula*: differently to what Mauss' affirms, it permits one to evaluate the width of the gap that *distances* magic from religion – and, reciprocally, appreciate the proximity of religion and science, which fight ferociously just as they unite in a common cause, both seeking possession of eminent causality. Magic, on the other hand, is a doctrine of *effects*: and all effect, from a point of view haunted by the cause (the concern) of the cause, is always an artefact, a "special effect", a lie. He who says "even if it is true, it is false" is someone who is preoccupied with the effects produced by what is said, by its *effectiveness*, which has nothing to do with its truth. Even the truth — specially the truth, it is tempting to say — is capable of prodigious effects of falsity and falsehood (as we all know, the best way to lie is to tell the truth). The only possible *pragmatics* of truth depends on this axiom: "even if it is true..." It has nothing in common with the hermeneutics of suspicion typical of critical sociology, which seeks a true essence behind the lies that are told within and by society. The truth is not a "particular case" of the lie, but a "whatever" case of the lie. This "even-handed intolerance", to borrow Barbara

Herrnstein-Smith's vigorous expression (ref), projects a possible image of anthropology as an epistemic demonology rather than as a laicized theology (in the spirit of the French Sociological School and its innumerable descendents), and suggests a path towards definitively freeing our discipline of the problematic of belief *and* unbelief.

41. Ezra Pound used to define literature as “news that stays news”, that is, as a discourse that is able precisely to change, to *not* stay put, but rather to exist as a perpetual, extra-historical becoming — always new, always news. In the same spirit, we might say that anthropology is “alterity that stays alterity”, or better, it is a discourse that is capable of making alterity reveal its powers of alteration – of making a life worth living. Cosmology is gossip; politics is sorcery, and anthropology is alterity that becomes alterity. This is the proper way of taking life – our own as much as any other – seriously. Seriously.

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